

Protracted Wars and the Balance of Power in the Middle East

Ikuya Kozuka, Senior Research Fellow, National Institute for Defense Studies, Ministry of Defense, Japan

Ukraine becomes the world's third-largest arms importer

Since 2014, Ukraine and Russia have been conflicted. Russia has unlawfully taken over Crimea and the Donbas region in southern Ukraine. Despite using advanced weapons, the Russian military has been unable to gain air superiority over Ukraine due to the Ukrainian military's strong air defense and determined resistance on the front lines. Ukraine has received significant military support from Western countries, including the United States. This conflict has led Ukraine to become the third-largest importer of arms worldwide.

Trends in Turkey, Iran, and Israel

The Middle East conflict has also affected both Ukraine and Russia. The article provides information on the Syrian civil war and the roles played by Turkey, Iran, and Israel. While Russia and Iran support the regime of Bashar Assad, the United States is working to eliminate remnants of the Islamic State. Turkey, a NATO member, has been collaborating with Ukraine and selling a drone designed for attacking specific targets, despite facing US sanctions for deploying a Russian-made missile system. Various Shia militias have assisted Iran in intervening in Syria to protect their logistics routes to the Mediterranean Sea. In response, Israel has conducted airstrikes on locations associated with IRGC and Hezbollah in Syria to disrupt these routes.

The article analyzes the ongoing conflict in Syria and the involvement of various countries in the region, including changes in strategies by the US, Russia, and China. The Biden administration has continued the presence of US troops in Syria to fight terrorism and potentially curb the growing influence of Russia, Turkey, and Iran in Syria. Russia's Middle East strategy is more flexible than the former Soviet Union's ideology and long-term systematicity, as they seek to establish connections with anti-Western groups. Japan should monitor the relationships between Russia, Iran, and Turkey and how they may impact their interests.

Changes in the US, China, and Russia's strategies toward the Middle East

Currently, US troops are in Syria to safeguard oil fields. However, their justification for being there appears inconsistent compared to their exit from Afghanistan. The US military's presence in Syria may have a dual purpose. While fighting terrorism is one of the objectives, it's also possible that it's aimed at exerting influence over Russia, Turkey,

and Iran's power in the region.

China has supported Russia's invasion of Ukraine and mediated the restoration of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. However, Saudi Arabia's security still depends on the US, and China lags Western arms suppliers in exports to most Middle Eastern countries. Its influence over Arab countries is limited compared to the United States. The current approach of Russia in the Middle East differs from that of the former Soviet Union. Rather than being guided by ideology and long-term planning, it prioritizes practicality and flexibility considering the region's stability and instability. Weakened by the invasion of Ukraine, Russia has the advantage of rebuilding relations with anti-Western forces.

1. Ukraine becomes the world's third-largest arms importer

The first anniversary of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which began on February 24, 2022, has already passed. Russian President Vladimir Putin's initial military objectives were to seize the Donbas region in eastern Ukraine, where many Russians live, and quickly capture the capital Kyiv. Its political aim was to establish a pro-Russian puppet government to replace President Volodymyr Zelensky. However, this Russian plan fell through in the early days after the invasion. The current battle is in a stalemate over the region from Donbas, eastern Ukraine to southern Ukraine and Crimea which has been illegally occupied by Russia since the declaration of annexation in March 2014. In this way, the Ukraine war is presently taking on the appearance of a long-term battle.

The main reason for the protracted stalemate of the war in Ukraine is the good performance of the Ukrainian army, which has increased its strength with military support from the West. According to data related to the 2022 Report on International Transfer of Weapons released by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) in March this year, Ukraine has been receiving a lot of support from Western countries, including grants, after the start of the Russian invasion. More than 60 times more arms have flowed into the country than in the previous year, thanks to aid and other means, and as a result, Ukraine has become the world's third-largest arms importer after Qatar and India. According to SIPRI, Ukraine alone accounts for 31% of European arms transfers and 8% of the world's total.

Looking more closely militarily, the inability of both the Russian and Ukrainian forces to establish air superiority has had a major impact on the war situation. For this reason, since the fall of 2022, the Russian military will continue to engage in a back-and-forth fierce battle with the Ukrainian military, using cruise missiles and drones rather than manned aircraft to carry out precision remote attacks on the Ukrainian power infrastructure and trench warfare on the ground. The main factors that brought about such a stalemate were the Ukrainian military's high air defense capabilities and tenacious resistance on the front lines. However, on the other hand, complex factors such as the poor strategy of the Russian army in the early stages of the invasion, the lack of deployed troops, the inadequate logistics capabilities, and the low morale of the soldiers, gave time for Western aid to Ukraine. I would also like to point out that the Ukrainian army, which is inferior in military strength, has put up a good fight.

As mentioned above, the situation of the war in Ukraine, which has been protracted, is a clear act of aggression against neighboring countries by the military superpower Russia, one of the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. As a result of the Putin administration's repeated threats to use nuclear weapons, the post-World War II international security order has been greatly shaken. However, 35 countries, including China, which had just reaffirmed its close friendship with Russia in

early February, abstained from voting on a resolution condemning Russia at the UN General Assembly in March 2022. It has also become clear that there is a division between China and Europe and the United States, which are inclined to strengthen economic sanctions against Russia.

In addition, since both Russia and Ukraine are major food producers such as wheat, it is undeniable that there will be a serious blow to global food security, especially in Middle Eastern countries that are heavily dependent on wheat imports. For this reason, even in the Middle East, where both the United States and Russia have been deeply involved in civil wars in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and other countries as foreign patron nations since the Cold War period, the Ukrainian war has had a considerable impact. Therefore, in this paper, I will focus on U.S. and Russian strategies for the Middle East, as well as the balance of power among regional powers Turkey, Iran, and Israel. I would also like to discuss the growing influence of China, which has become a hot topic recently.

2. Trends in Turkey, Iran, and Israel

In addition to the United States and Russia, the three countries of Turkey, Iran, and Israel are still deeply involved, and in March 2023, the 12th anniversary of the outbreak of the Civil war triggered by the anti-government protest demonstrations due to the influence of the Arab Spring, in Syria. In the current situation of the Syrian civil war, a significant amount of northwestern and northeastern Syria is supported by Bashar Assad's regime and its supporters Russia and Iran, and the United States, which continues its mop-up operations against remnants of the Islamic State (IS). Kurdish forces effectively control parts of the country as a de facto autonomous region, and Turkey regards such Kurdish forces as an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which promotes separatist movements in the eastern mountainous region of the country.

Syria remains divided between Turkey, which has repeatedly carried out cross-border attacks, and the Turkish-backed rebels that control Idlib province in northwestern Syria. In northwestern Syria, the civil war has now largely subsided, creating a military stalemate. The main reason for this is that the ceasefire in Idlib Governorate agreed upon at the summit meeting in Moscow in March 2020 between Russian President Putin and Turkish President Erdogan remained effective. The influence of Understaffed Russia, which is recruiting mercenaries in Syria to send to Ukraine, does not appear to have the capacity to continue to intervene in the Syrian civil war.

Turkey is a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), but since it deployed the Russian-made surface-to-air missile system S-400 in July 2019, it has been sanctioned by the United States for fear of leaking NATO military secrets to Russia. It

was also excluded from the joint development program for the F-35 fighter. However, in the Ukrainian War, he sold Bayraktar TB2, an unmanned attack aircraft manufactured by Baikal, to Ukraine and cooperated in Ukraine's resistance to Russia. TB2 was provided to the Azerbaijani army in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, which took place from September to November 2020, and has a proven track record of achieving great results. Along with Iran, which will be discussed later, Turkey is attempting to expand its external influence by actively developing drone diplomacy through the war with Ukraine.

However, on February 6, 2023, the damage caused by the earthquake near the northwestern border of Syria in southern Turkey was enormous, with more than 50,000 deaths in both countries and simultaneous presidential and parliamentary elections will be held by June 2023. There is also the fear that it will be a major blow to the administration of President Erdogan, who is refraining from implementing it. Erdogan has sought to quell Western opposition to his country through mediation diplomacy with both Russia and Ukraine and his veto power over the NATO accession process for Sweden and Finland. However, there is a strong possibility that the Turkish military operations against northern Syria during this year at least will be difficult due to the effects of the earthquake.

Iran's intervention in Syria, on the other hand, is led by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Lebanon's Shia militant group Hezbollah, and Shia militias recruited from across the Middle East, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and elsewhere. Iran's strategy focuses on securing logistics routes from Iran to the Mediterranean Sea to use southwestern Syria and southern Lebanon, near the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, which was the bases for attacks against Israel. Iran has also provided Russia with its self-made Shahid-136 and Shahid-131 suicide drones to support the Russian military's remote attacks on Ukraine's power infrastructure. Furthermore, as a result of the stalled reconstruction negotiations with the United States that continued until last year, Iran Nuclear Agreement (JCPOA) ran into a deadlock. It is reported on February 28 that the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has compiled a report confirming that it is suspected of producing 100% of uranium.

In response to this Iranian threat, Israel frequently conducts airstrikes on IRGC and Hezbollah-related facilities in Syria. Israel seeks to cut off logistics routes leading from Iran to Syria, particularly targeting components shipped from Iran to Syria related to air defense systems, cruise missiles, long-range missiles and drones, and electronic warfare systems. With the formation of a coalition government in Israel at the end of last year between the hard-liners Netanyahu, who oppose the creation of a Palestinian state, and the far-right party, Israel may step up military pressure on Iran in 2023.

3. Changes in the US, Russia, and China's strategies toward the Middle East

The Biden administration continues to maintain the presence of US troops in Syria, ostensibly for defending oil fields. However, when considering the "war on terrorism" as the purpose of the stationing of U.S. forces, there are cases of Afghanistan, which declared that it had achieved its purpose and forced a hasty and complete withdrawal at the end of August 2021, and the case of the Biden administration's stationing in Syria. It would be hard to deny the lack of consistency with the continuation policy.

In this regard, the primary purpose of the US military presence in Syria is certainly to continue the war on terrorism. However, the Biden administration may be more concerned with US geopolitical interests in curbing the growing influence of Russia, Turkey, and Iran in Syria.

In contrast, Russia's current Middle East strategy lacks the ideology and long-term systematicity of the former Soviet Union and has practical flexibility that takes into consideration the realistic stability and instability of the region. Weakened by the invasion of Ukraine, Russia has the advantage of rebuilding relations with anti-Western forces. From now on, Japan needs to pay particular attention to the interests between Russia and Iran, and Turkey.

China, which has provided side support to Russia in its invasion of Ukraine, mediated the restoration of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which had been severed for seven years since January 2016. However, in my opinion, it would be a mistake to simplistically evaluate this agreement as a victory for Chinese diplomacy. This is because Saudi Arabia's security remains dependent on the United States. For example, according to data from SIPRI's report, Saudi Arabia was the world's second-largest arms importer from 2018 to 2022, and the United States supplied her with 78% of Saudi Arabia's arms imports during this period. According to the report's analysis, China is a minority as an arms exporter relative to its economy and lags Western arms suppliers in arms exports to most Middle Eastern countries, particularly Arab countries. Therefore, China's influence over Arab countries should still be considered limited compared to the United States.